

Cues for Subject Identification in a Swiss German Dialect: Integrating Socio- and Psycholinguistic Perspectives

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Introduction


With regard to sentence processing, psycholinguistic research has mostly focused on examining standard languages. Only recently has there been a trend to investigate systematic variation of language, such as dialectal varieties, from a psycholinguistic perspective (Cai et al., 2011; Vorwerg et al., 2014). Language varieties have traditionally been focused on by sociolinguistics. Making them a central subject of psycholinguistic research enables us to close the gap between cognitive and social perspectives onto language and to approach language realities in psycholinguistic research (Vorwerg, 2013).

In a sentence interpretation task, MacWhinney, Bates and Kliegl (1984) tested which cues German speakers rely on when identifying the subject of a sentence. Animacy of an object proved to be the strongest factor, followed by agreement and word order, although the latter did not prove significant. They did not examine case marking in their study, but assumed that it is the most important factor in determining subject roles in a sentence. In contrast to Standard German, the Bernese German dialect does not mark accusative case for masculine nouns, which may lead to more ambiguous transitive sentences than in Standard German, which might render word order more important for subject identification in the dialect.

Research question

Does the cue hierarchy for subject identification in Standard German sentence interpretation also apply to the Bernese German dialect?

Method

- Sentence interpretation test with a *who-did-it*-task: Participants were asked to identify the actor in each sentence.
- Auditory stimuli consisting of simple transitive sentences:
 *dr Schmätterling grüesst dr Schnägg* (the butterfly greets the snail)
d Hüet beobachtet d Geiss (the hats observes the goat)

Participants:

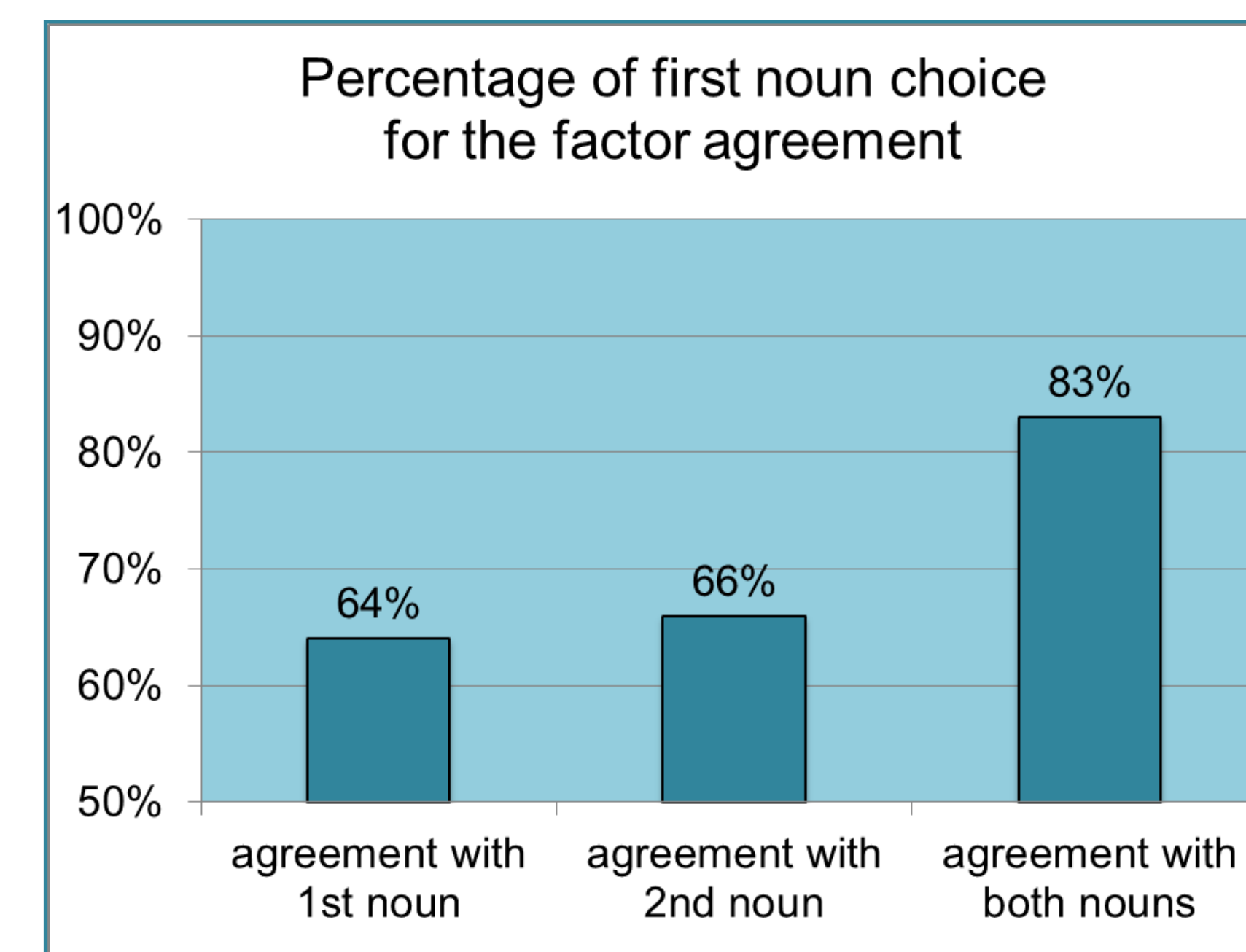
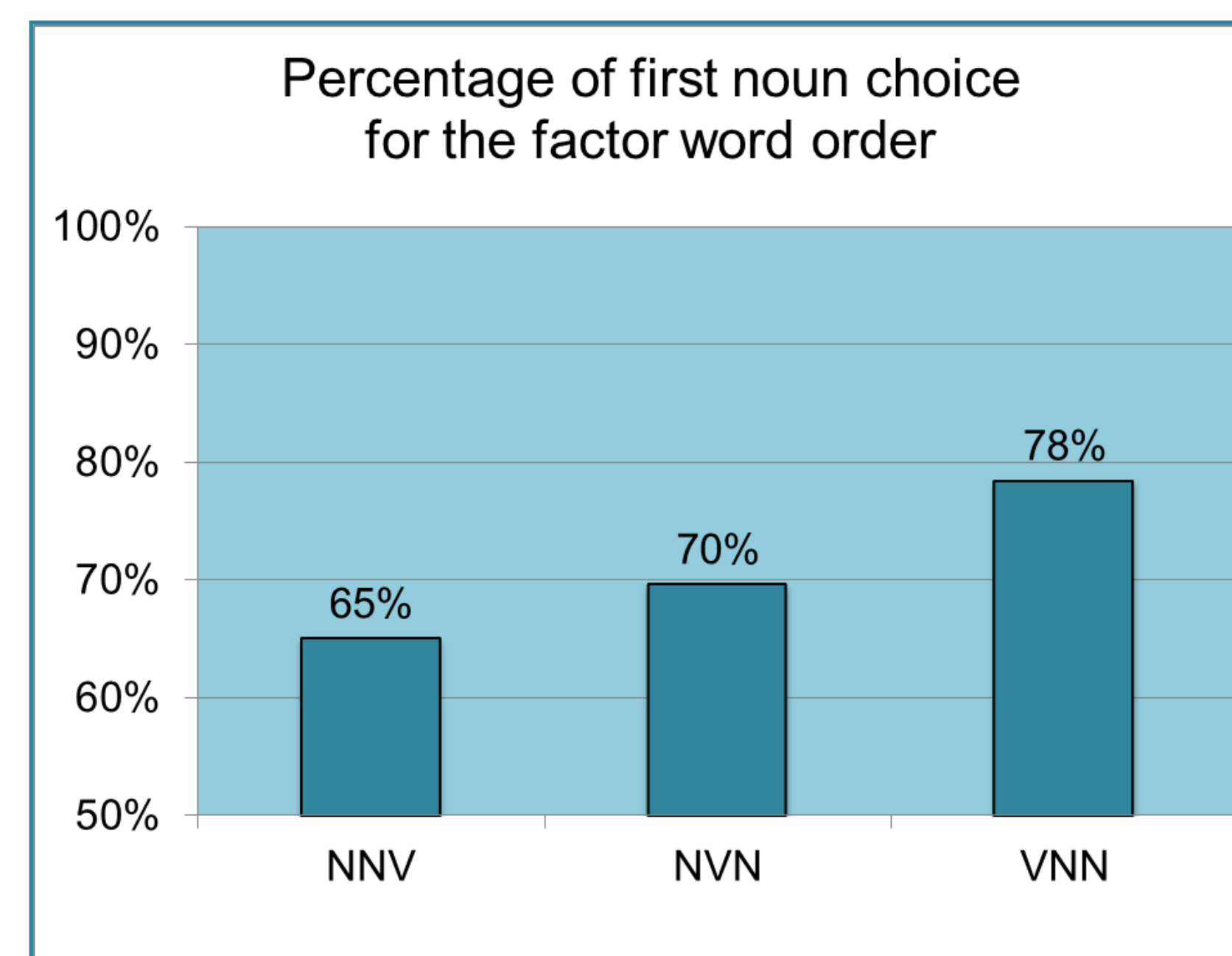
24 Bernese German native speakers

Four factors were systematically manipulated within participants:

- Word order: NVN, NNV, VNN
- Animacy: animate/animate, animate/inanimate, inanimate/animate
- Agreement: agreement with both nouns, agreement with 1st noun, agreement with 2nd noun
- Stress: no stress, stress on 1st noun, stress on 2nd noun

Results

In 1380 of 1944 responses the first noun of the sentence was identified as the actor (71%).



A logit-loglinear analysis revealed significant

- main effects for word order and agreement
- interactions between word order and agreement, word order, animacy and stress, as well as between all factors

Discussion

The results indicate that Bernese German speakers rely more strongly on word order and agreement, and less on animacy. In contrast, Standard German speakers rely predominantly on animacy and agreement (MacWhinney, Bates, & Kliegl, 1984). Thus, even though Bernese German and Standard German are varieties of the same language and very similar from a linguistic perspective, the two varieties clearly differ with regard to the hierarchy of cues relevant for sentence interpretation. Probably, this is due to small grammatical differences between the varieties, such as the absence of accusative marking for masculine nouns in Bernese German.

This finding further emphasizes the need to include non-standard varieties in psycholinguistic research, and shows that results obtained for a standard language do not necessarily apply to other varieties.

References

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